

## ISSACHAR: SLAVE OR FREEMAN? (GEN 49:14-15)

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The blessing of Jacob (and the blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33) has long been considered by critical scholars to be a collection of originally independent oracles that circulated in oral form as folk literature, perhaps during the period of the judges. They are said to have been gathered together in this chapter by an unknown redactor, possibly J. Some of the oracles, therefore, are positive, and some are negative. Since they arose independently, there is no inherent unity in the chapter and no common author for the sayings.

One of the viewpoints that has contributed to this opinion is the negative appraisal of Issachar in Gen 49:14-15. If a redactor merely gathered the oracles, we ought not to expect to find any guiding principle in the organization of this chapter, apart from the genealogical sequence. We are not surprised by a couple of negative oracles (vv 3-7) followed by some positive oracles (vv 8-13) followed by the rebuke of Issachar (vv 14-15) and then some more positive oracles (vv 16-27).

If the exegesis presented in this article is correct, however, then we see unity in the deliberate two-part organization of the chapter: negative oracles (vv 3-7) followed by positive oracles (vv 8-27). The viewpoint presented here is that the blessing of Issachar is a statement about the good, hard-working character of Issachar, consistent with the statement of the author's purpose in Gen 49:1. In this chapter Jacob is giving his blessings to his sons (49:28) as he tells them what will happen to them in days to come.

The *RSV* reflects the common understanding of most scholars and most translations regarding this oracle:

Issachar is a strong ass,  
crouching between the sheepfolds;  
he saw that a resting place was good,  
and that the land was pleasant;  
so he bowed his shoulder to bear,  
and became a slave at forced labor.

In this article, however, I will defend the following translation:

Issachar is a sturdy donkey  
lying down between two saddlebags.  
When he sees how good is a resting place  
and how pleasant the land,  
he will bend his shoulder to bear,  
and he will become a laborer who tills.

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## I. THE COMMON VIEW: REBUKE

The oracle is generally considered by both critical and conservative scholars today to be one of rebuke of the freemen who had let themselves be enticed by the fertile plain and had thereby become humiliated as beasts of burden. Issachar is supposedly castigated for exchanging independence for the self-satisfied serfdom of Canaanite domination. Gerhard von Rad claims that Issachar originally lived inland in the mountains and later pushed into the western plain, thereby losing political independence. That move caused Issachar to become a vassal of the Canaanites.<sup>1</sup> There was a large number of Canaanite city-states in the plains at this time.<sup>2</sup>

Von Rad calls v 14 a sadly comical picture of an ass that has knelt with its heavy saddle baskets and can no longer stand up.<sup>3</sup> Hans-Joachim Kittel comments appropriately that the oracle is not one of derision but of rebuke.<sup>4</sup> Hermann Gunkel calls the verse "a sharp rebuke."<sup>5</sup>

The picture is that of a powerful yet docile beast of burden.<sup>6</sup> While all other animal comparisons in the chapter are given in a praiseworthy sense—for example, Judah in v 9—most commentators believe that here Issachar is rebuked for behaving in a manner unworthy of a strong ass.<sup>7</sup>

## II. THE MINORITY VIEW: PRAISE

But if "saddlebags" is the correct translation and the "lying down" is not laziness but a moment of rest, then v 15 may be a picture of a strong donkey that has been working. The donkey has been carrying two saddlebags, but it has paused to "rest from exertion."

The positive nature of all other animal comparisons in both Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 suggests the possibility that this oracle contains a similarly positive statement about Issachar. A brief survey of the other animal comparisons will illustrate this point.

In Genesis 49, Judah is compared to a lion's cub in v 9, Dan to a serpent in

<sup>1</sup>G. von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL; 2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 426.

<sup>2</sup>H.-J. Kittel, "Die Stammessprüche Israels, Genesis 49 und Deuteronomium 33, traditionsgeschichtlich" (Berlin: Kirchl. Hochschule, 1959) 25.

<sup>3</sup>Von Rad, *Genesis* 426.

<sup>4</sup>Kittel, "Stammessprüche" 25.

<sup>5</sup>H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (HKAT; 5th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1922) 483.

<sup>6</sup>R. Davidson, *Genesis 12-50* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979) 306.

<sup>7</sup>B. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977) 463-464; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (10th ed.; London: Methuen, 1916) 387; see also Kittel, Gunkel, von Rad, Skinner, Procksch, Simpson (*IB*), Kidner and others.

v 17, Naphtali to a doe in v 21, Joseph to a young calf in v 22,<sup>8</sup> and Benjamin to a wolf in v 27. In Deuteronomy 33, Joseph is compared to a bull in v 17, Gad to a lion in v 20, and Dan to a lion's cub in v 22. The animal comparison was an early device (see below), perhaps used for expressing the strong points of an individual.

It is my opinion that scholars have been too quick to read western views of the ass into this text. For centuries the word "ass" has been a metaphor in the English language for stupidity. Neither this text nor any other text in Scripture, however, speaks of the ass in a derogatory way. The ass is an important animal in Scripture—sure-footed in rough terrain, able to survive on poor forage, the basic transportation of poorer people, bearer of burdens, and the like. There are expressions of concern in the OT regarding the safety of asses, and Jesus himself twice comments on the humane treatment of livestock, including asses. Therefore not only does the consistency of the animal comparisons speak for the positive nature of this oracle but also the entire attitude of the Scriptures speaks for a word of praise in Gen 49:14–15.

A number of commentators have indicated that the oracle is not a rebuke. Keil and Delitzsch feel that there is nothing either contemptible or glorifying in the figure. They interpret the oracle as a description of Issachar's contentment with material goods, devotion to labor and agriculture, and lack of interest in political power and rule. Issachar would become a robust, powerful race of men and receive an inheritance that would invite comfortable repose. The bravery of Issachar and Zebulun in Judg 5:14, 15, 18 suggests this positive view.<sup>9</sup>

G. Ch. Aalders thinks of a strong, powerfully built donkey, and he also sees nothing derogatory in the oracle. He thinks of a powerful people with a sheltered, relaxed life, willing to carry the burdens of others. Slavery or forced labor are not necessarily in the picture here. Perhaps Issachar settled in the valley of Jezreel and supplied labor and provisions for through traffic.<sup>10</sup>

Eduard König writes similarly, thinking that Issachar performed lucrative services for the merchants passing through the plain of Jezreel.<sup>11</sup> J. P. Lange writes: "In the rich enjoyment of his land, he willingly bore the burden of labor and tribute imposed on his agriculture and pasturage," but he asks us not to think of servitude here.<sup>12</sup>

William White notes that *rābaš*, "to lie down," means to "rest from exer-

<sup>8</sup>I am well aware of the uncertainty over the exegesis of the Joseph saying and others. However, even if Joseph were compared in this verse to a plant (an unlikely event, in my opinion) the comparison would still be a positive one. Furthermore a strong case can be made for viewing each animal comparison in a praiseworthy sense.

<sup>9</sup>C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch, Vol. 1; Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), part 1, 403.

<sup>10</sup>G. Ch. Aalders, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 2. 282–283.

<sup>11</sup>E. König, *Die Genesis* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1919) 735.

<sup>12</sup>J. P. Lange, *Genesis* (New York: Scribner's, 1913) 657.

tion."<sup>13</sup> This reinforces our interpretation, suggesting that there is nothing inherent in the verb to suggest the laziness of the person or tribe so described. Those who find laziness here have been influenced by the rebuke of Reuben in vv 3–4, where there is a contrast between what Reuben might have become and what he actually became. They expect to find the same thing said of Issachar.

Some writers have pointed out the wordplay that is in the background. The name Issachar has been variously explained as a combination of *yissā' sākār*, "he takes wages,"<sup>14</sup> or *'iš sākār*, "man of wages."<sup>15</sup> BDB lists the name under *yēš*, suggesting a derivation from *yēš sākār*, "there is recompense." KB explains the origin of the name similarly, although without reference to *yēš*. The allusion is to a day-laborer, a worker (*sākār*), an allusion indicating the character of the tribe, not necessarily in a derogatory sense.

### III. STURDY DONKEY

The phrase *hāmōr gārem* has caused considerable stir, particularly on the meaning of *gārem*, translated here as "sturdy." KB and BDB give the meanings "bone, strength, self." The second meaning is generally upheld for this verse, although the description of the donkey as a bony ass could also convey the idea of strength.

Harold Stigers thinks of a "rawboned donkey" (so *NIV*), not well fed and therefore weakened. This is supposedly symbolic of the spiritual weakness of the tribe because of its failure to depend fully upon God.<sup>16</sup> Most authors, however, prefer some sense of strength in the expression.

The *JPSV* has "Issachar is a strong-boned ass." Skinner thinks of a bony—that is, strong-limbed—donkey, indicating that Issachar had strength enough to remain independent but preferred ease to exertion.<sup>17</sup> Leupold thinks of sturdy physical strength.<sup>18</sup> König calls Issachar strong but slow.<sup>19</sup> The preference of Aalders for a picture of strength has been mentioned above. Hans-Jürgen Zobel mentions parallels in Job 40:18; Prov 25:15, where *gerem* is a

<sup>13</sup>W. White, "rābaš, lie down," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (ed. R. L. Harris et al.; Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2. 830.

<sup>14</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch* 403.

<sup>15</sup>Gunkel, *Genesis* 484.

<sup>16</sup>H. G. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 328.

<sup>17</sup>J. Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910) 525–526; so also Gunkel, *Genesis* 483.

<sup>18</sup>H. C. Leupold, *The Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942), 2. 1187.

<sup>19</sup>König, *Genesis* 734.

symbol of strength.<sup>20</sup> Others who see a picture of strength are Kittel, Driver, Bennett, Meek and Procksch.<sup>21</sup>

The LXX reading, *Issachar to kalon epethymēsen*, “Issachar desired that which is good,” is to be rejected because it is the easier reading.<sup>22</sup> It likely reflects an original *hemed gāras*, according to C. D. Ginsburg.<sup>23</sup> Samuel Feigin feels that the LXX was simply making an intelligent guess. Other versions, such as the Syriac, the Vg, and the Targum of Jerusalem, think of the idea of strength.<sup>24</sup>

Feigin offers another translation of *gārem*. He writes that the simile is inappropriate to the conduct of the tribe if the translation “bony, strong ass” is retained. A “bony” or “strong” ass crouching between sheepfolds is not fitting. It does not make sense for a strong tribe to come to an inglorious end, he says.

This particular objection falls by the wayside if one sees with the critics a contrast being presented here, similar to that spoken of Reuben in Gen 49:3–4, between the strength and potential of Issachar and the eventual servitude of that tribe. However, Feigin’s question points us to another interpretation, which depicts a hard-working, sturdy donkey. The donkey is temporarily resting from its hard work. When it sees how pleasant is its future inheritance, it will get back to work and will continue that hard work in Canaan (v 15).

Noting the Samaritan Pentateuch’s reading, “ass of strangers,” *hāmōr gērīm*, Feigin thinks that the original read *gārīm*, not *gērīm*. Drawing a parallel from the Arabic verb *garama*, “to cut, shear,” he would translate here “castrated ass.” A castrated ass humbly takes the yoke, Feigin comments, crouching between sheepfolds. The meaning has been forgotten because the practice of castration fell into disuse due to legal prohibition.<sup>25</sup> This is an argument from silence, however, and our exegesis will clearly point us in another direction.

Nevertheless Feigin objects that if the author meant “a sturdy donkey,” why did he not use a Hebrew word for “strong,” or the Hebrew word *‘ešem*, “bone,” instead of *gerem*? And why not *hāmōr gērāmīm* instead of the singular?<sup>26</sup> However, the use of *gerem* as an appropriate picture of strength has

<sup>20</sup>H.-J. Zobel, *Stammesspruch und Geschichte: die Angaben der Stammessprüche von Gen 49, Dtn 33 und Jdc über die politischen und kultischen Zustände im damaligen ‘Israel’* (BZAW 95; Berlin: A. Töpelmann, 1965) 16.

<sup>21</sup>S. I. Feigin, “Hamor Garim, ‘Castrated Ass,’” *JNES* 5 (1946) 230–231; Kittel, “Stammessprüche” 25.

<sup>22</sup>Kittel, “Stammessprüche” 24.

<sup>23</sup>C. D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Ktav, 1966 [1897]) 254.

<sup>24</sup>Feigin, “Hamor” 230–231.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 232.

already been mentioned above, answering most of these questions raised in protest.

Feigin has aroused some support. The *NEB* translates "a gelded ass," and F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman concur.<sup>27</sup> The evidence is much too slight, however, and all of the objections raised by Feigin can be satisfactorily answered.

#### IV. SADDLEBAGS

The word *hammišpētāyim*, "saddlebags," appears only here, in Judg 5:16 and in Ps 68:14 (without *mēm*-preformative). One major viewpoint (e.g., *RSV*) takes the word to mean "sheepfolds."<sup>28</sup> Orlinsky writes that the picture of ease and comfort represented by the translation "sheepfolds" seems preferable to that of "saddlebags," particularly on the basis of Judg 5:16.<sup>29</sup> It seems, however, that his view is colored more by his exegesis of the passage than the actual meaning of the word. U. Cassuto claims on the basis of the three occurrences of the word that to dwell "among the sheepfolds" is a traditional expression for one who refrains from participating in battle.<sup>30</sup> That explanation also labors under the misconception that the verse is a rebuke.

A. D. Crown thinks that the dual form and the root *šāpat* lend themselves better to the idea of a donkey squatting on its haunches. He thinks either of the dual of *šāpā*, "lip," or of a derivation from *šāpat*, "to set," or perhaps *šābat*, "to rest, cease."<sup>31</sup> The preposition *bēn* rules out that possibility, although we will return later to the dual ending.

Albright suggested "hearths" or "fireplaces."<sup>32</sup> He was followed in this by Cross and Freedman, who translate: "He couches among the rubbish piles." They see a connection with *ʾašpôt*, "rubbish heap."<sup>33</sup> J. Gray took Eissfeldt's suggestion and translated as a dual, "(between) the converging fold-walls," a reference to part of the structure of a sheepfold, which helped to corral the flocks.<sup>34</sup> Many ancient versions translate "boundaries" or something similar.

<sup>27</sup>F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (SBLDS 21; Missoula: Scholars, 1975) 86 n. 50.

<sup>28</sup>*JB*, *RSV*, *NEB* "cattle-pens"; Zobel, *Stammesspruch* 16; Kittel, "Stammessprüche" 25; Gunkel, *Genesis* 484; Leupold, *Exposition* 1187.

<sup>29</sup>*Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (ed. H. M. Orlinsky; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969) 142.

<sup>30</sup>U. Cassuto, "Psalm LXVIII," in *Biblical and Oriental Studies I* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973) 262.

<sup>31</sup>A. D. Crown, "Judges 5.15b-16," *VT* 17 (1967) 240-242.

<sup>32</sup>W. F. Albright, "The Earliest Forms of Hebrew Verse," *JPOS* 2 (1922) 78 n. 2.

<sup>33</sup>Cross and Freedman, *Studies* 86 n. 52.

<sup>34</sup>P. C. Craigie, "Three Ugaritic Notes on the Song of Deborah," *JSOT* 2 (1976) 41-42. The reference is to J. Gray, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, p. 287, and to O. Eissfeldt, "Gabelhürden im Ostjordanland" and "Noch einmal: Gabelhürden im Ostjordanland," *Kleine Schriften III* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1966) 61-70.

The most likely translation is that of the *NIV*: “two saddlebags.”<sup>35</sup> The *JPSV*, *TEV* and *KJV* also translate this way. The idea of “sheepfolds” in a verse that speaks about a donkey is inappropriate. E. A. Speiser translates “saddlebags,” although taking the phrase in a caustic rather than a complimentary sense.<sup>36</sup> Skinner comments that the dual form makes one think of the double baskets carried by an ass, a picture suitable to the mention of the ass.<sup>37</sup> Aalders thinks of “saddlebags,” but he considers that translation a reference to the open, protected areas in the mountainous regions. For him a “saddle” is an area between two elevations that provides shelter in bad weather.<sup>38</sup> In this way he avoids the implication that there is a rebuke of Issachar in the verse.

Derek Kidner admits that “sheepfolds” would seem easier in Judg 5:16, but that verse may owe something to Gen 49:14 and may actually depict a beast refusing to move with its load.<sup>39</sup> He favors the *KJV*, “two burdens”—that is, saddlebags or large baskets—since it is favored by modern commentators and suits the picture of a tribe too willing to trade its liberty for the material things of life.<sup>40</sup>

After a careful study of the versions, English translations, and lexicons, J. E. Hogg in a little-known study concluded that “sheepfolds” is the translation in some English versions and some lexicons but in no ancient versions. Furthermore he stated that the force of the dual is brought out in some of the versions—that is, in those versions that truly understood the meaning of the word. Finally there is a connecting link in text B of LXX in Judges, the Venetus manuscript in Genesis, and the Latin Tremellius and Junius manuscript in Genesis and Judges. They translate “double load,” “half-burden,” and *sarcinas* (“burdens,” “ash-heaps”) respectively. Hogg therefore suggests that the evidence is best suited to the translation “between the two loads.” The word then refers to an ass laden with a burden on each side of his back.<sup>41</sup> The translation “saddlebags” suits this word of praise quite well.

## V. VERSE 15

Verse 15 continues the thought of the previous verse, explaining what Issachar, the “sturdy donkey,” will do when he arrives in Canaan. Although the *RSV* translates “saw,” “bowed” and “became,” the verbs appear in the imperfect tense, indicating incomplete action. In no case is there a *wāw*-conversive for-

<sup>35</sup>A. Saarisalo, *The Boundary Between Issachar and Naphtali* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemia Toimituksis, 1927) 92. A long-influential treatment of “saddlebags,” unavailable to the author.

<sup>36</sup>E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) 367.

<sup>37</sup>Skinner, *Genesis* 526.

<sup>38</sup>Aalders, *Genesis* 282–283.

<sup>39</sup>Kidner, *Genesis* 219 n. 4.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>41</sup>J. E. Hogg, “The Meaning of *hmšptym* in Gen. 49:14 and Judg. 5:16,” *AJSL* 43 (1926–27) 299–300.

mation. Furthermore, it is well-known that consecutive or conversive forms of the verb are generally absent in poetry. Cross and Freedman comment regarding the apparent *wāw*-conversive forms that "this superficial conformity to the standard prose practice of the Bible is without real significance."<sup>42</sup> Therefore we translate "sees," "will bend" and "will become."

Most think that the verse speaks of a tribe strong enough to conquer the Canaanites in its area but willing to forego political power and military victory in favor of enjoying the good land, even at the cost of liberty. The people of Issachar are willing to work for others just as long as they can enjoy peace and quiet. It is hard to see how Issachar could expect to enjoy subjugation or be willing to endure it after the experience of 430 years of oppression in Egypt (if one agrees with the critics for a moment and allows the oracle to be a prophecy after the fact). It is also hard to see how subjugation would be preferable to liberty, particularly when the history of Israel is replete with rebellions against various overlords. It is better to take the verse as a description of the willingness of Issachar to work, since his inheritance in Canaan is received.

## VI. THE LETTER OF BIRIDIYA

Kittel introduces an interesting historical note from archaeology. A letter from the royal archives of Amenhotep III and his son Akhenaten appears in *ANET*,<sup>43</sup> showing that Shunem, a city within the territory allotted to Issachar, is being worked by forced labor around the fourteenth century B.C. The letter is from a prince of Megiddo named Biridiya. Kittel calls this Amarna letter the oldest evidence for the existence of an Israelite tribe on Palestinian soil,<sup>44</sup> although our interpretation suggests that this parallel is irrelevant to our verse. Amenhotep III ruled Egypt in the years 1408–1372, and his son Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten) ruled from 1372 to 1354.<sup>45</sup> The existence of forced labor and consequently the strength of some Canaanite city-states in this part of Canaan at this particular time in history is thereby proven,<sup>46</sup> but its application to Issachar is not.

Kidner quotes Martin Noth approvingly in saying that it is possible in the early days that Zebulun, Dan and Asher (see Judg 5:17) paid for their settlement on territory controlled by Sidon by providing forced labor in the Sidonian ports, while Issachar did the same for Deborah to the south.<sup>47</sup> However, the exegesis that follows will dispute this interpretation.

<sup>42</sup>Cross and Freedman, *Studies* 29.

<sup>43</sup>*ANET* 485.

<sup>44</sup>Kittel, "Stammessprüche" 25–26.

<sup>45</sup>K. A. Kitchen, "Land of Egypt," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (ed. M. H. Tenney; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 2. 231.

<sup>46</sup>Kittel, "Stammessprüche" 26.

<sup>47</sup>Kidner, *Genesis* 219.



## VII. EXEGESIS

The first two cola demonstrate a close parallelism. In v 15ab Issachar sees a beautiful, pleasant land. Part of Issachar's inheritance included the fertile plain of Jezreel. While König translates "rest,"<sup>48</sup> Zobel, Skinner and Gunkel see in *mēnûhâ*, "resting place," a term for the settled life in contrast to the nomadic life (see Deut 12:9; Ps 95:1).<sup>49</sup>

The word, however, is feminine in gender, and the masculine adjective does not agree with the noun it modifies. Procksch solves the problem by translating the word as a substantive: "something good."<sup>50</sup> The Samaritan Pentateuch reads *twbh*, the feminine adjective, and the LXX and Vg translate the adjective as a feminine. Therefore Kittel suggests reading *tôbâ*, as does Gunkel.<sup>51</sup> Zobel's suggestion that the final *hê* on *tôb* was mistakenly taken as the sign of the definite object for *hâ'âreš*, "the land," would solve two problems: the lack of agreement in gender between noun and adjective, and the unusual occurrence of the sign of the definite object.<sup>52</sup> However, the sign of the definite object is not necessarily a late feature.

The most likely explanation is that an older orthography is reflected here, where the final vowel is to be pronounced even though there is no *mater lectionis*. That would point up another archaic form in this verse. In addition, the parallelism of *tôb/nâ'ēm* is attested in Ugaritic as *n'm//tb*, suggesting that the parallelism is very ancient.<sup>53</sup>

The parallelism of the two particles, *kl*, is self-evident. Orlinsky suggests taking it as an emphatic adverb, translating "how."<sup>54</sup> That suggestion has been followed by the *NIV* and is followed here.

On the appearance of the sign of the definite object, GKC 117b explains that it is a rare occurrence in poetic style since poetry represents a somewhat more archaic stage of the language than prose. After case endings had become extinct, some external means of indicating the accusative was needed. The word *mēnûhâ* is obviously a direct object, but *hâ'âreš* is not so obvious. The sign of the definite object may be an indication of a later reworking or editorial updating of the text<sup>55</sup> (after the manner of the *New King James Version*), introduced here originally for clarity. In itself this is not an objectionable view.

<sup>48</sup>König, *Genesis* 734.

<sup>49</sup>Zobel, *Stammesspruch* 16; Skinner, *Genesis* 526; Gunkel, *Genesis* 484.

<sup>50</sup>O. Procksch, *Die Genesis* (KAT 1; 2d and 3d eds.; Leipzig and Erlangen: A. Deicherische, 1942), 1. 280.

<sup>51</sup>Kittel, "Stammesprüche" 24; Gunkel, *Genesis* 484.

<sup>52</sup>Zobel, *Stammesspruch* 17.

<sup>53</sup>*Ras Shamra Parallels* (ed. L. R. Fisher; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1972-81), 2. 277.

<sup>54</sup>Orlinsky, ed., *Notes* 142.

<sup>55</sup>So Cross and Freedman, *Studies* 86 n. 55.

"He will bend his shoulder to bear" may be a reference to the burden mentioned in v 14, "two saddlebags." The saddlebags are the burden he will bear, saddlebags perhaps containing grain from his fields. In any case it is certainly an expression of Issachar's willingness to work.

### VIII. SLAVE OR FREEMAN?

The final phrase of the verse is a construct chain, and it is the key to the interpretation of the saying. I. Mendelsohn reflects the majority viewpoint, taking *lēmas-ōbēd* to mean "a slave at forced labor." He writes:

It refers to a variety of state slavery in which the corvée workers were reduced to the status of slaves. This was not practiced in Israel until the time of David and Solomon, and then only upon subjugated non-Israelites. The instance here must refer to the subjection of Issachar to the Canaanites at an early period of the occupation, or perhaps to the Philistines toward the end of the period of the Judges. Conceivably this may reflect the situation of certain Hebrew groups in Palestine before the conquest.<sup>56</sup>

There are several things about the customary interpretation that are unsettling. First, all of the blessings that surround vv 14–15 are positive. The only two clear rebukes are in vv 3–4 and 5–7, and they obviously refer to historical events of the past. We would expect another rebuke also to give the reason for the rebuke, but there is no record of any shameful deed done by Issachar. Verses 3–7 may be listed first in order to cover all negative sayings first so that Jacob can continue with the rest of the sayings, all of which were to be positive.

Second, we have noted earlier that all other animal comparisons in both Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 are positive.

Third, the phrase *lēmas-ōbēd* appears in the OT for the first time in v 15. If the chapter is truly archaic, it may be that the phrase should be taken in an elementary, nontechnical sense to refer to "a laborer (literally "bearer"; see below) who tills" (i.e., the land), or perhaps "a laboring worker." Walter Kaiser notes that the verb *ābad* often means "to till" when used in reference to the land (as here), hence the LXX translation.<sup>57</sup>

The meaning "a slave at forced labor" would then be a later development of the phrase, perhaps occasioned by the entrance into Canaan and the use of that phrase there in a somewhat technical sense. Then scholars are found guilty of reading later meanings back into the phrase here. The LXX supports the elementary, nontechnical meaning of the phrase, translating *kai egenēthē anēr geōrgos*, "and he became a farmer/tiller."

The phrase *lēmas-ōbēd* appears twenty-three times in the OT, and the translations of the LXX in those instances are noteworthy. In one case (Josh 16:10) there is no corresponding Greek word or phrase. In twenty-one instances the phrase is translated by a word indicating the subjection of one person or people to another (fourteen times by the word *phoros*, "tribute"). Only at Gen

<sup>56</sup>I. Mendelsohn, "State Slavery in Ancient Palestine," *BASOR* 85 (February 1942) 14–17.

<sup>57</sup>W. C. Kaiser, Jr., "ābad, work, serve," in *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*, 2. 639.

49:15 is the phrase translated by *geōrgos*. While some might argue that the LXX translators have here made a mistake, we must remember that the LXX of Genesis is one of the finest and most reliable of the LXX translations. We therefore conclude that the translators understood the nontechnical meaning of the phrase, possibly because of their understanding of the Egyptian language.

It must be admitted, however, that the translators may simply have recognized that *mas* was a noun (of unknown meaning to them). They then translated primarily on the basis of their understanding of *ʾabad* in this agricultural context.

The meaning and derivation of *mas* has been debated. Some think that the word comes from *nāsā*, “to test, try, weigh,” while others suggest *māsā*, “to melt, grow faint.” Gesenius offered *māsas* as the suggestion of most, but he himself preferred to think that the word was really a contraction from *mekes*, “tribute, toll,” from the root *kāsas*, “to number.”<sup>58</sup> Still others (e.g., BDB) admit that the derivation of the word is unknown. However, the best suggestion by far is that the word is an Egyptian loan-word. KB suggests *ms*, “bearer,”<sup>59</sup> used in various inscriptions of the New Kingdom (c. 1580–1166 B.C., although it must be much older than this) to mean someone who brings supplies, someone who bears stones, or someone who brings offerings. The Egyptian verb in its transitive meanings from the same root shows similar versatility, referring to such things as bringing an offering, bringing taxes, dragging prisoners, playing a musical instrument, or stretching out the hand with a gift for someone. It is certainly not a technical phrase for slave labor, but its use in certain contexts to refer to dragging prisoners lends itself well to a later technical meaning in the OT.<sup>60</sup>

What is more natural than for Jacob, a resident of Egypt at the time these words were spoken, to make use of a native word to convey the idea he has in mind? We are reminded of the view of Westermann and others that the presence of an animal comparison is evidence of the antiquity of the sayings in Genesis 49.<sup>61</sup> Not only do we find this data informative for the exegesis of this oracle, but we also find here evidence for attributing the saying to Jacob (as the text itself demands in Gen 49:1).

The attractive feature of this interpretation is that it yields a consistent picture, viewing Issachar in a positive sense and thereby allowing vv 14–15 to mesh well with the context. The two verses say that Issachar is a sturdy, hard-working donkey, who at the present time is resting from his labors. When

<sup>58</sup>On *nāsā* cf. E. König, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche, 1910) 231; on *māsā* cf. G. L. Carr in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*; Gesenius' *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 488.

<sup>59</sup>Citing A. Erman and H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* (1926–31), 2. 135.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>C. Westermann, *Genesis* (BKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1982), vol. 1, part 3, 276. See also Kittel, “Stammessprüche” 22; Zobel, *Stammessprüche* 15.

Issachar sees how good his inheritance is and how productive the land may become, he will continue his hard-working efforts (the participial form denotes ongoing labor).

The traditional interpretation has been upheld for centuries, receiving support from the Vg (*factusque est tributis serviens*, "and he has been made a slave by taxes"), many translations, and many commentators, both conservative and critical. In our judgment, however, the LXX is the correct interpretation here.

It is in the final phrase, *lēmas-ōbēd*, that the wordplay pointed to in connection with the preceding verse is also evident. The name Issachar need not be taken to mean "hireling." If it means something like "man of wages, worker," then the wordplay is still evident. The "man of wages" will live up to his name by working hard. The wordplay is complete with this phrase in v 15d,<sup>62</sup> unifying the two verses by surrounding the contents of the verses with the two parts of the pun.

<sup>62</sup>Leupold, *Genesis* 1188.